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CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 001764

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SUBJECT: JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES REPORT POSITIVE MEETING WITH
RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

REF: A. TASHKENT 1546

1B. TASHKENT 1197

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Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: During a conversation with the Ambassador on September 28, Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) AmCit General Counsel noted having a "constructive" meeting that week with Acting Religious Affairs Committee Chairman Ortiq Yusupov, who reportedly assured him that deregistration for the last remaining legal JW congregation in Chirchiq remained "off the table." On a less positive note, Yusupov reportedly told the General Counsel that no more JW congregations will be registered in Uzbekistan for the near future, and the General Counsel said that several members of a congregation were arrested in Bukhara after applying for registration. Another two shipments of JW literature were also reportedly detained in Bukhara province en route from Germany to Tajikistan. Though the news about the Chirchiq congregation is most welcome, it also reveals the role that Tashkent plays in making decisions on registration that are ostensibly made at the local level. End summary.

Deregistration of Chirchiq congregation "off the table"

12. (C) During a courtesy call with the Ambassador on September 28, Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) AmCit General Counsel noted having a "constructive" meeting that week with Acting Religious Affairs Committee Chairman Ortiq Yusupov, who reportedly assured him that the deregistration of the last legal JW congregation in Chirchiq is still "off the table." Earlier in August, the General Counsel told poloff that authorities had sent a second warning letter to the Chirchiq congregation, accusing its members of proselytizing, and expressed concern that the Chirchiq congregation could soon be deregistered, which would automatically make all JW activity in Uzbekistan illegal (ref A).

13. (C) During a separate September 25 meeting with poloff, the General Counsel explained that upon closer examination, the second letter received by the Chirchiq congregation from the Tashkent provincial Ministry of Justice was not an official warning letter. Thus, by his count, the congregation has so far only received one warning letter (Note: The JW congregation in Ferghana City, the only other

JW congregation to have been registered in Uzbekistan, lost its registration last year shortly after receiving a second warning letter. End note.)

¶4. (C) On a less positive note, Yusupov reportedly told the General Counsel that no further JW congregations will be registered in Uzbekistan for the near future, even though officially, the Religious Affairs Committee has no control over whether officials at the local level accept a congregation's application for registration or not.

BUKHARA CONGREGANTS DETAINED FOR APPLYING FOR REGISTRATION

¶5. (C) On September 25, the General Counsel told poloff that nine members of the Kagan JW congregation in Bukhara province were arrested in early August and briefly detained by local officials. None of the congregants were abused. During their interrogation, the deputy police chief reportedly told one of the congregants that they had been arrested for applying for registration. The congregation's application for registration had been formally denied on July 25. Although the General Counsel did not want to publicize the incident, he said that it was being taken very seriously, as it was the first time that JW congregants were allegedly punished for attempting to follow Uzbek law. When the General Counsel informed Yusupov about the case, he reportedly became angry at the local officials and promised to investigate what had occurred.

¶6. (C) While refraining from going into detail, the General Counsel told the Ambassador that hundreds of JW congregants have been convicted of administrative offences, which usually result in a fine or short period of detention. The General Counsel said that the Jehovah Witnesses do not have the resources to publicize all such incidents, and therefore,

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they focus on the few cases involving much more serious criminal charges.

¶7. (SBU) In a written statement on Uzbekistan recently presented at the annual OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw, the European JW Association stated that the police and National Security Service (NSS) have raided homes of Jehovah's Witnesses, confiscated religious literature, and physically and verbally abused Witnesses who were simply attending peaceful religious meetings in private homes. It also notes that there are over 1,100 documented cases of Witnesses having been arrested, detained, fined or beaten, with 700 of those occurring during annual religious observances of Jesus' death in 2005 and 2006.

FERGHANA HOKIMIYAT: FIND A NEW (LESS CONSPICUOUS) BUILDING

¶8. (C) On September 25, local JW representative Sergei Artyushkov (strictly protect) told poloff about a relatively cordial meeting he had recently with Ferghana City Deputy Hokim (mayor) Rano Karimova, who reportedly told him that the JW's application to register a legal address for their house of worship was rejected because the building, which is located on one of Ferghana City's busiest streets, is "too centrally located and conspicuous." Karimova reportedly was concerned that President Karimov could drive pass the house during an official visit to Ferghana City. According to Artyushkov, Karimova hinted that the congregation should try to register a less centrally located building as their official address (Note: The JW are trying to reregister their Ferghana City congregation, and applying for a legal address is one of the first steps towards registration. End note.) Artyushkov reported that Karimova appeared to be a more reasonable interlocutor than most other local officials he had met.

SECOND HAMIDOV APPEAL DENIED

¶19. (C) On September 25, the General Counsel told poloff that the second appeal of Irfan Hamidov, who was convicted in May for illegally teaching religion and sentenced to two years imprisonment at a labor colony (ref B), was rejected by the Samarkand Provincial Criminal Court on September 21. The JW next plan to appeal to the Supreme Court, and if that course of action also fails, they will then consider approaching the UN Human Rights Committee. The General Counsel stressed that the Jehovah's Witnesses would first exhaust all legal remedies in Uzbekistan and that approaching the UN was only a last resort, a point he also reportedly stressed with Chairman Yusupov.

¶10. (C) In their written statement to the OSCE HDIM, the European JW Association reported that Hamidov was badly beaten on three occasions at the Samarkand Pre-Trial Detention Center by Investigator Rasulov, who reportedly demanded details about other JW congregants in Samarkand. On one occasion, the beating reportedly lasted an hour, and Hamidov's attorney later saw the bruises on various parts of his body. During a meeting with poloff on September 25, the General Counsel said that JW congregants had recently visited Hamidov at the labor camp near Samarkand, and he appeared to be treated well.

¶11. (C) The General Counsel also reported to poloff that Dilafruz Arziyeva, who was convicted of teaching religion illegally and sentenced to two years of corrective labor in June (ref A), has not had to start serving her sentence yet. The Jehovah Witnesses plan on lodging a second appeal on her behalf with the Samarkand Regional Criminal Court.

TWO SHIPMENTS OF LITERATURE NOW DETAINED

¶12. (SBU) According to the statement for the OSCE HDIM, in August 2006, Tashkent Customs detained a shipment of 500 Russian Bibles and 500 copies of the book "What Does the Bible Really Teach?" in Russian that was sent to Uzbekistan by Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany. In October 2006, the Committee for Religious Affairs sent the JW a letter explaining that the shipment was detained because they did

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not see the need for so many books, as the JW only have one registered congregation in Uzbekistan. The CRA offered the JW the choice of: 1) returning the shipment to Germany; 2) rerouting the shipment to Kazakhstan; or 3) destroying the literature. Although the JW quickly replied that the shipment should be rerouted to Kazakhstan, the literature is still detained in Uzbekistan. In January 2007, DCM Baktiyor Ibragimov of the Uzbek Embassy in Washington informed JW representatives that Foreign Minister Norov had consented to the release of the literature. However, local JW representatives in Uzbekistan were later asked to pay approximately 6,000 dollars in storage fees to the customs service before the literature would be released.

¶13. (C) During his meeting with Yusupov, the General Counsel reportedly requested that the detained literature be recognized as a humanitarian gift, which would obviate the necessity of paying storage fees. According to the General Counsel, Yusupov said that the suggestion would be considered.

¶14. (C) After the meeting with the Ambassador on September 28, the General Counsel told poloff about two rail shipments of JW literature en route from Germany to Tajikistan that were detained by local Uzbek custom authorities in Bukhara province. The General Counsel reported visiting the State Customs Committee, where he received the names of officials that he would try to contact via fax to resolve the problem. He had not raised the issue with the MFA or Yusupov.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Yusupov's assertion that that the GOU is not considering deregistration of the Chirchiq congregation is welcome news, although his comment that no more JW congregations will be registered in Uzbekistan underscores how decisions on registration ostensibly made at the local level are really determined in Tashkent. We would also note that the problems Jehovah's Witnesses face today in Uzbekistan are nearly identical to those four years ago (when current P/E Chief served as Human Rights Officer). If anything, the Jehovah's Witnesses appear to be in a slightly worse situation now. What was clear from the General Counsel's meeting with the Ambassador was that the Jehovah's Witnesses intend to pursue every legal avenue available to them under Uzbek law to demonstrate that how the GOU treats Jehovah's Witnesses is a violation of Uzbekistan's own Constitution.

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